



Policy Brief

November 2007

The King Baudouin Foundation and Compagnia di San Paolo
are strategic partners of the European Policy Centre

Continental shift? Redefining EU-Africa relations

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Background

The term “partnership” has been used in reference to EU-Africa relations since the Treaty of Rome in 1957. While the spirit of cooperation this implies has persevered over the decades, it has been largely unequal and mostly limited to a development agenda.

However, the EU and Africa have vowed that the December 2007 EU-Africa Summit – the first in seven years – will be different, marking the beginning of a “strategic partnership” to reflect the changing nature of EU-Africa relations.

So what has changed? For one, and despite several egregious exceptions, Africa is at its most stable and democratic since the independence movements of the 1960s.

Moreover, it is in the midst of something of an economic boom, with overall continental growth rates consistently above 5% in recent years.

At the same time, Africa’s voice on the international stage has become louder, fostered by the creation of the African Union (AU) in 2002.

The EU’s position has also changed. It has increased its range of foreign policy capabilities and its willingness to use them, including putting its own “boots on the ground” through the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). This has had a profound effect on how the EU views its responsibilities as an international actor.

The international context has also lent new urgency to both sides’ commitment to a strategic partnership. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has obliged the EU and Africa to replace the traditional Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) preferential trade agreements with (still controversial) new Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs).

The role of new outside political powers in Africa, most specifically China, has also forced a re-evaluation of the relationship.

But has this change been matched by a corresponding convergence of understanding between the two sides?

While the EU and Africa share many of the same core values, as espoused in the Joint Strategy to be agreed at the Summit, they do not necessarily have the same priorities nor put the same emphasis on some values.

This Policy Brief written jointly by the European Policy Centre (EPC) and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) analyses how the EU and Africa see each other, identifies both the commonalities and the gaps between the two sides, and assesses just how real and sustainable this new strategic direction in the relationship is.

State of play

The EU perspective

Although things are changing, many in the EU complain that Africa still lacks a coherent ‘face’. Ironically, this is a charge which is all too often levelled against the Union as well, but it is a far more daunting challenge for the opaquely-defined “Africa”.

For the EU, ‘Africa’ is chiefly – although not exclusively – represented by the African Union. It is with the AU that the EU has invested much of its energy, and it is the AU which will be responsible for implementing the bulk of the commitments made by Africa at the 8-9 December Summit.

But does the AU have the capacity and capabilities required to this? The 27-strong EU has a Commission with some 25,000 staff, while the 53-strong AU’s Commission only has around 500.

National sovereignty is also much more closely guarded in Africa than it is by EU Member States. The EU may therefore be guilty of willing the AU to be its virtual equivalent when, in reality, it is not only far away from this in organisational terms, but also lacks the supranational powers at the EU’s disposal and the same degree of political commitment from its members.

This reflects the disconnection between what the African side trumpets as its wish – to be treated as “one Africa” – and the reality on the ground. The ‘one Africa’ approach belies the fragmentation in the region, which is home to countless regional organisations with overlapping memberships and portfolios, from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to the growing East Africa Community. The reality is that ‘one Africa’ is in fact ‘many Africas’.

While no regional organisation, particularly one comprised of 53 members spread over a massive geographic landmass, can be expected to be entirely consistent, Europeans complain that Africa’s positions sometimes shift depending on who they are talking to. Thus when Beijing hosted the China-Africa Summit in November 2006 and excluded a number of African states that recognised Taiwan, there were few complaints; but when EU politicians (most notably in the UK) suggested that Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe should not be invited to the forthcoming EU-Africa Summit, they were roundly criticised for dictating terms to Africa.

Similar complaints about a lack of consistency have also been heard in relation to Africa’s ability to uphold its own stated principles, particularly those entrenched in the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD).

Launched in 2001, NEPAD is aimed at setting standards and approaches to good governance and development, and includes the African Peer Review Mechanism, in which laggard states are identified by a panel of fellow African leaders. However, less than half of the continent’s countries have signed up to it and there has been little more than ‘quiet diplomacy’ to address the most serious examples of bad governance, such as Zimbabwe.

On the other hand, the AU and ECOWAS have shown a great willingness to play a leading role in peace and security operations – most recently in Darfur, but also in countries like Liberia and the Ivory Coast. This idea of ‘African solutions for African problems’ resonates well in a traditionally risk-averse EU.

Furthermore, while continuing and even expanding its ESDP commitments in Africa (with

the planned EUFOR mission to Chad and the Central African Republic), the EU has found supporting African initiatives to be an effective way to address peace and security issues constructively with the continent. Dedicated EU funds are now available – largely in the form of the African Peace Facility – specifically for this type of initiative.

Claims that the EU-Africa agenda is driven solely by European values and priorities are unfair, especially given that the new Joint Strategy was formulated following an unprecedented mutual consultation process and tackles all the key areas of common concern, including peace and security; trade and regional integration; governance, democracy and human rights; and, of course, development.

There is a significant difference, however, in the emphasis placed on these issues by either side. One example of this is the importance attached to good governance and human rights promotion – crucial for the EU; and migration, which the Europeans tend to view largely as a threat and something to be thwarted, while African countries see it as the result of inequalities in an international system which keeps the West on top and which therefore compels people to migrate there. African countries also fear the resulting ‘brain drain’.

Finally, the EU considers itself a “soft” or even “moral” power, and this not only affects the way the EU sees its role in Africa, but also how its actions on the continent contribute to its standing on the international stage.

By broadening the sectors in which it is involved in Africa (from development to security and governance support), the EU can better champion its core values of

human rights, rule of law and democracy. Still, strategic interests matter too. For instance, Africa is increasingly an economic magnet for the EU. The broader the relationship and the deeper the engagement between the two sides, the better this is for European business and geo-political interests. With immense competition for Africa's natural resources coming not only from China, but also from India and the US, Europe's perception of Africa needs to evolve from 'development client' to fully-fledged partner.

The African perspective

Since the mid- to late-1990s, Africa has undergone a degree of soul-searching and changes in approach to the problems that have plagued it since decolonisation. Influenced by global developments and a new breed of modernising leaders in key African states, the focus began to shift to the need for greater democratisation, human security and the unleashing of productive capacity within African economies.

The creation of the AU and its subsidiary institutions, coupled with the lofty ideals espoused in the NEPAD adopted by African states a year earlier, cemented this shift in outlook. For the external world, it provided an opportunity for a more systematic engagement with African states and institutions on a host of new issues, well beyond development aid.

Inasmuch as African countries are not all the same, there is also a multiplicity of African views of Europe. Perceptions of how Europe interacts with Africa range from neo-imperialist and paternalistic to friend or equal partner. Furthermore, in the minds of many Africans, there is not necessarily a clear distinction between Europe as the EU and European countries as former colonial masters. This perspective – which is replicated in Europe, where the diversity of African levels of development and

political culture are often lumped together – can complicate the perceptual landscape.

Many Africans see what they regard as Europe's 'obsession' with democracy and human rights when dealing with Africa as a neo-colonial conditionality which pays little regard to particular local conditions. Africans also argue that economic development and poverty alleviation/eradication are the continent's main concerns, and must have primacy given the level of development in African states, whereas democracy and human rights seem to be Europe's over-arching priorities. Although one-dimensional, these perceptions exist – and the EU's actions sometimes reinforce them.

The Joint Strategy, for example, places agriculture, food security, infrastructure, debt cancellation, and human and social development under the fourth pillar of 'key development issues', even though Africans regard these as the most important issues to be addressed.

Good governance is clearly a necessary precondition for sustainable development, as is responsible and accountable political leadership. In the absence of an open articulation of different interests domestically, with the requisite pressures exerted on political leadership, the elite has often abused its power for its own gain and suppressed opposition when it has become inimical to promoting those interests.

Notwithstanding the existence of a large body of declarations and institutions aimed at promoting the values enshrined in the AU's founding documents, African leaders are still uncomfortable about dealing with recalcitrant states. They prefer not to use the stick of sanctions – except in cases of unconstitutional changes of power, where states have been suspended from the AU – and are angered by what they regard as the inconsistencies in the EU's approach.

Furthermore, many African officials believe that if the Joint Strategy is truly about entrenching a real partnership, there should also be frank discussions of human rights violations in Europe, especially against many migrants from Africa, as well as the practice of extraordinary renditions. In other words, there is a strong perception that Europe's emphasis on values is littered with double standards and underlying hidden agendas – often driven by a colonial mentality.

In many African minds, economic development and trade issues confirm this perception: the negotiations on both the EPAs and the WTO's Doha Round are highly complex issues. In the public perception, EPAs are seen as potentially costly for African states, although the EU's 'Everything But Arms' policy will continue to apply to low-income countries. The EU's stance in the Doha negotiations is also seen in Africa as a stumbling block to progress and thus as undermining the EU's stated commitment to promoting economic development.

As new external actors emerge on the African stage, the continent's countries inevitably draw comparisons between them and the EU, its Member States and other traditional partners, on the focus, the types of conditions attached, the activities funded and the speed with which commitments are met.

However, the EU and its Member States have made a significant contribution to Africa's development in many ways – and these contributions have not gone unnoticed by both African leaders and civil society (notwithstanding the fact that support for civil society has not always been viewed positively by African elites). In the face of scarce resources among citizens and more organised civil society actors, support to help bolster such institutions is critical.

A true partnership necessitates first and foremost that both sides internalise what this means. For African countries, it means breaking out of the old reactive and sometimes passive mindset, which focused excessively on the donor-recipient relationship. They argue that Europe needs to become more aware of the perceptions outlined above and

recognise that it is not easy to change them overnight.

In breaking out of the aid-relationship syndrome, Africans must pay more attention to the areas where they can effect change with minimal resources ('low-hanging fruits') and which can contribute to unleashing the productive potential within their

economies. African states are not homogenous. There are clearly reformers and drivers of progress in the continent, such as South Africa, Ghana and Nigeria, which have a responsibility to champion the values and principles espoused in AU declarations and thus give greater substance to many of the positive initiatives begun in the last decade.

Prospects

The relationship has the potential to reap enormous benefits for both sides, and the Joint Strategy charts a path for the future based on partnership and mutual accountability.

However, this will not happen overnight. If the aim is to move the two continents 'beyond aid', then African states and the AU should develop a more comprehensive game plan, identifying clearly what they want from this, encompassing both political and multilateral/global issues. This will not be easy, as African states have not reached anywhere near the level of Europe's integration, thus making it difficult to talk of a common African policy towards Europe, the US or China.

While conflict still plagues some parts of Africa, the continent has made great strides over the last 20 years. South Africa's re-entry into the global community after 1994, the democratisation of most African states, and the creation of the AU and NEPAD, have provided the impetus for the development of a new set of criteria to govern the relationship between the two continents.

As this relationship matures, African states must recognise that external partners – from former colonial

powers to new emerging players such as China and India – will be driven not only by altruism but also by their own national interests. Although operating on this basis and acting as 'good global citizens' are not mutually exclusive, Africans need to recognise this and to become clearer - both individually and collectively - about their needs and concerns, and how to achieve them.

On the European side, the concerted effort to build a partnership is having an effect on the way EU countries shape their external actions, especially considering that policies towards Africa – outside of the parameters of the ACP agreements – were once firmly a matter for those Member States with colonial histories and interests.

While national policies have so far only been partially channelled into an EU framework, there is an increasing drive towards establishing common benchmarks and rules of behaviour.

Furthermore, perceptions on each side about the other are gradually converging through improved and more regular elite-level engagement and enhanced exchanges among civil society, business, and academia. While it is unrealistic to expect the two continents to see eye-to-eye on all the major issues, this should not

undermine the process of building a stronger partnership – and one which could potentially extend to the development of a stronger rules-based multilateral framework.

The 2007 Joint EU-Africa Strategy heightens expectations about the future of EU-Africa relations. The most significant element of this strategy is, in fact, not so much the document itself but more the process which has led to its production.

While major stumbling blocks such as the EPAs remain – and there are concerns that the strategy is too general in many areas – it does reflect an explicit acknowledgement by both the EU and Africa that 'business is usual' is not an option. A new chapter has been opened: it now needs to be written.

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